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Sai to Tsunagari no Minzokushi: Kita-Tai Sanchi Karen no Minzoku to Jenda is the result of a 20-plus year relationship between the author Hayami Yoko and the community of Senyakhi, a Karen village in Northern Thailand. The richness of ethnographic detail, depth of analysis and vibrant pulse of personal experience makes this a dense but engaging narrative. Hayami Yoko, professor at Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, demonstrates the power of Kyoto's commitment to field-based research.

The Karen are now well-known in the literature on mainland southeast Asian as a people "living in the middle," straddling a pliable boundary between marginalized upland society and lowland mainstream society. Hayami's previous major work *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen* [2004] is solidly located within this framework. In *Sai to Tsunagari*, Hayami has stepped outside of this comfortable framework, into a broader and more illuminating discussion of identity and interaction, center and periphery, self and other. At one level, the book deals with what it has meant to be Karen for the women and men of the community as Thailand moved through different stages of "development." At another level, Hayami elaborates how differentiation — particularly through the lens of gender relations — melds into opportunities for new connections. The book is composed of three main analytical sections: 1) Ethnicity and Gender: Ethnic Minority Karen in the Thai Nation-state, 2) Gender in the practices of daily life, and 3) At

the Intersection of Differentiation: Gender within an Ethnoscape.

In order to highlight the stream of change in their position within Thai society, Hayami reviews how speakers of Karen languages have been perceived and named in a historical context. Originally known as "Yang" in the times of nation-state building and proselytization, the Karen were a forest people on the fringes of civilization. Potential for converts drew the attention of both Buddhist and Christian missions, although the Karen remained "others," in opposition to the emerging nationalistic image of "proper Thai." Moving into the era of development, Karen identity shifted to "Kariang," denoting an ethnic minority group worthy of study in this period of nation-state growing pains that included communist insurgency, environmental degradation and an opium problem. At the same time, the Kariang were part of a development problem, which was to be addressed through policy and project interventions. Finally, starting in the 1990s, an alternative understanding of upland people emerged, stressing environmental sustainability derived from traditional lifestyles, indigenous knowledge and customary management of forests. The Karen themselves played an active role in this redefinition of identity, as the name "P'gakanyaw" became a symbol of the Karen as a solution to the human-nature coexistence problem.

These changes are intimately linked to the creation and recreation of gender relations. The basic starting point for understanding gender in Southeast Asia stresses a high level of independence and the high social position of women. The first work on gender in Karen society stressed the importance of bilateral social organization, contributing to the understanding of a Karen gender "complementarity." However, Hayami explains, gender research in the uplands and lowlands progressed without much interaction or

mutual influence throughout the 1980s. A discourse of sexuality emerged as a common phenomenon in both upland and lowland gender analysis, as the “exotic woman” captured the imagination of men from the outside. In the mountains particularly, perceptions of the sexually free Akha prevailed in Thai society. Unmarried Karen women, on the other hand, wearing the traditional white one-piece long Karen dress, came to represent purity, which still reinforced the same element of the exotic within the discourse of sexuality.

Against this backdrop, Hayami draws on the realm of daily practice in explaining the changes in women’s roles, spaces and contributions to Karen society. Two areas of ritual practice underscore these change dynamics. First is the practice of the *au xe* ancestor ritual, which is traced through the female lineage and led by the oldest woman of the household. As such, the *au xe*, centered spatially on the household hearth, represents the continuity of reproduction and nourishment within a household. At the same time, it creates broader linkages in society through participation in the rituals and associated social interactions. As religious conversion and other economic pressures have brought about a reduction in the practice of the *au xe*, the living space has been physically transformed. The hearth loses its ritual meaning, and the household shifted from a women’s space into a men’s space.

The management of ritual life at the village level is conducted by the *hi kho*, a position of ritual leadership passed through patrilineal descent. The *hi kho* presides over four main rituals, all of which are concerned with maintaining village harmony: village soul-calling, offerings to the spirits of the swidden fields and irrigation canals, the retrieval of lost spirits and animals, and the appeasement of spirits in the case of improper sexual relations. This final ritual is conducted in the village of the women, asserting

the male *hi kho*’s control over unmarried women’s sexuality. Thus, gender roles are defined through ritual practice and given form in the lifecycle of the village’s men and women, from birth, through adolescence and marriage, childbirth, aging and death.

The differentiations created through gender relations in the practice of daily life play out at a broader level of multi-ethnic society as well. Hayami describes the intersection of differentiations using two windows on the ethnoscape: inter-ethnic marriage and the mobility of individuals. Marriage between Karen and non-Karen is not rare. In the past, northern Thai and Shan men would on occasion marry into a Karen village, and the wife would continue to conduct the *au xe* ritual. More recently, however, there is a more marked trend towards the out-marriage of women, and it is much more common for Karen women to marry non-Karen men than the converse. The reason for this lies in recent changes in the socio-economic foundations upon which these relationships develop; namely the mutual reinforcement between non-Karen men searching for the “added value” of morally pure young Karen woman and the Karen woman looking for new opportunities on the outside. It is interesting to observe that the intersection of gender and ethnicity in the upland ethnoscape is not simply about the continuation or extinguishment of a social category, but rather embodies a new departure, and thus, connection. The second aspect of connection is the experience of crossing borders; that is, the movement of women to cities for work, adventure and relationships. This is explained as not only the individualization of morals or ethic, but should be considered as decisions made based on the availability of options – agency created within a context of constraints. In this final section, Hayami leaves more of the argumentation to the Senyakhi women themselves, presenting longer narratives to

allow them to speak for themselves. This complements nicely Hayami's use of Karen terminology throughout adds flavor to how social dynamics are expressed by the local people.

As Hayami asserts and shows throughout, her intention is not to demonstrate how upland women are marginalized and oppressed. Nor does the book try to paint a picture of some idealized lifestyle. The message of the book about how "otherness," created in the process of ethnic and gender differentiation, is transformed into connection and relatedness. Thus, differentiation does not simply end in unidirectional domination. Rather, the differentiation observed within the realm of daily practices preserves some form of relationship, and becomes the basis for the creation of new linkages.

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Reference

Hayami, Yoko. 2004. *Between Hills and Plains: Power and Practice in Socio-Religious Dynamics among Karen*. Kyoto University Press.